Reading: Prose Fiction Sample Passage and Items

Sample Passage 2: Prose Fiction

On Union Boulevard, St. Louis, in the 1950's, there were women in their eighties who lived with the shades drawn, who hid like bats in the caves they claimed for home. Neighbors of my grandmother, they could be faintly heard through a ceiling or wall. A drawer opening. The slow thump of a shoe. Who they were and whom they were mourning (someone had always just died) intrigued me. Me, the child who knew where the cookies waited in Grandma's kitchen closet. Who lined five varieties up on the table and bit from each one in succession, knowing my mother would never let me do this at home. Who sold Girl Scout cookies door-to-door in annual tradition, who sold fifty boxes, who won The Prize. My grandmother told me which doors to knock on. Whispered secretly, "She'll take three boxes—wait and see."

Hand-in-hand we climbed the dark stairs, knocked on the doors. I shivered, held Grandma tighter, remember still the smell which was curiously fragrant, a sweet soup of talcum powder, folded curtains, roses pressed in a book. Was that what years smelled like? The door would miraculously open and a withered face framed there would peer oddly at me as if I had come from another world. Maybe I had. "Come in," it would say, or "Yes?" and I would mumble something about cookies, feeling foolish, feeling like the one who places a can of beans next to an altar marked For the Poor and then has to stare at it—the beans next to the cross—all through the worship. Feeling I should have brought more, as if I shouldn't be selling something to these women, but giving them a gift, some new breath, assurance that there was still a child's world out there, green grass, scabby knees, a playground where you could stretch your legs higher than your head. There were still Easter eggs lodged in the mouths of drainpipes and sleds on frozen hills, that joyous scream of flying toward yourself in the snow. Squirrels storing nuts, kittens being born with eyes closed; there was still everything tiny, unformed, flung wide open into the air!

But how did you carry such an assurance? In those hallways, standing before those thin gray wisps of women, with Grandma slinking back and pushing me forward to go in alone, I didn't know. There was something here which also smelled like life. But it was a life I hadn't learned yet. I had never outlived anything I knew of, except one yellow cat. I never had saved a photograph. For me life was a bounce, an unending burst of pleasures. Vaguely I imagined what a life of recollection could be, as already I was haunted by a sense of my own lost baby years, golden rings I slipped on and off my heart. Would I be one of those women?

Their rooms were shrines of upholstery and lace. Silent radios standing under stacks of magazines. Did they work? Could I turn the knobs? Questions I wouldn't ask here. Windows with shades pulled low, so the light peeping through took on a changed quality, as if it were brighter or dimmer than I remembered. And portraits, photographs, on walls, on tables, faces strangely familiar, as if I was destined to know them. I asked no questions and the women never questioned me. Never asked where the money went, had the price gone up since last year, were there any additional flavors. They bought what they remembered—if it was peanut-butter last year, peanut-butter this year would be fine. They brought the coins from jars, from pocketbooks without handles, counted them carefully before me, while I stared at their thin crops of knotted hair. A Sunday brooch pinned loosely to the shoulder of an everyday dress. What were these women thinking of?

And the door would close softly behind me, transaction complete, the closing click like a drawer sliding back, a world slid quietly out of sight, and I was free to return to my own universe, to Grandma standing with arms folded in the courtyard, staring peacefully up at a bluejay or sprouting leaf. Suddenly I'd see Grandma in her dress of tiny flowers, curly gray permanent, tightly laced shoes, as one of them—but then she'd turn, laugh, "Did she buy?" and again belong to me.

Gray women in rooms with the shades drawn . . . weeks later the cookies would come. I would stack the boxes, make my delivery rounds to the sleeping doors. This time I would be businesslike, I would rap firmly, "Hello Ma'am, here are the cookies you ordered." And the face would peer up, uncertain . . . cookies? . . . as if for a moment we were floating in the space between us. What I did (carefully balancing boxes in both my arms, wondering who would eat the cookies—I was the only child ever seen in that building) or what she did (reaching out with floating hands to touch what she had bought) had little to do with who we were, had been, or ever would be.

Naomi Shihab Nye, "The Cookies." © 1982 by Naomi Shihab Nye.

Sample Items for Passage 2

1.Which of the following statements represents a justifiable interpretation of the meaning of the story? A.The girl's experience selling Girl Scout cookies influenced her choice of careers.

B.The girl's experiences with elderly women made her aware of the prospect of aging.

C.Because she spent so much time with her grandmother, the girl preferred the company of older people to that of other children.

D.The whole experience of selling Girl Scout cookies was a dream or hallucination and had nothing to do with who the girl really was.

2.When she delivered the Girl Scout cookies, the girl most likely adopted a businesslike attitude because: A.she hoped that such an attitude would persuade the elderly women to buy more cookies.

B.her grandmother had urged her to be more polite.

C.she wanted to avoid recalling the thoughts she had during her previous visit.

D.the elderly women really wanted little to do with her.

3.The girl was taken aback by the sight of her grandmother (5th paragraph) because: A.the grandmother has a look of disapproval on her face.

B.it seems odd that her grandmother should be staring at a bluejay.

C.the grandmother asks if the woman bought any cookies.

D.it occurs to the girl that her grandmother is an old woman.

4.What conclusion can most justifiably be drawn about the adult woman who narrates the story? A.She understands her reaction to the elderly women better now than she did as a girl.

B.She now looks down on elderly women and their way of living.

C.She is concerned about living conditions for the poor.

D.She believes she should never have tried to sell cookies to the women.